

The Sporton Inaugural Lecture: The Body and the Intellectual

Thank you very much for attending. I am delighted to see so many people here, so I guess the suspense has worked. It's true I have been at the university for some time, more than four years, and joined as a Professor, having been made one at BCU in 2010, so this evening is long overdue. In my defence there were a number of things that have forced its postponement: when I joined Greenwich in January 2013 I had a book contract on which the deadline was fast approaching, and then soon after arriving there appeared the opportunity to be involved with the development of this magnificent building, then there was an argument to be put about the place of art, design and creative practice inside it and how the university would cope with this more generally. This was followed by the reality of consequences that I had put in motion: founding a new department in the midst of a restructuring of the university, moving it into a new building, developing its culture and seeing to its many needs has given plenty of reasons to put today off until things settled down, or at least that was the plan. When we started I recall telling colleagues that new buildings don't solve your existing problems, they simply eliminate them. The trouble is they also give you a whole lot of new ones that hadn't considered before, and thus it has been with the establishment of Creative Professions and Digital Arts here in Stockwell Street. At the very least I can say, after forcing the university community to wait so long for the pearls of professorial wisdom you are about to hear, that it has been my privilege to have had responsibility for sorting them out. In the process I have been able to work with some outstanding people whose only fault, in my view, is that of modesty. I am grateful for their support and enthusiasm in dismantling most of the former structures in which they worked. I have also been lucky enough to have augmented the staff base at CPDA, appointing some richly talented academics, some to their first permanent post in Higher Education. They have brought energy, quality, talent and focus to the department. As a staffing group I would acknowledge their tenacity in facing down some of our problems: excellence is not achieved by rhetoric or policy or regulation: it is created by commitment and hard work, following through an idea to its logical conclusion, taking into account the riskiness of the proposition and betting on yourself and your colleagues to see it through. On our first day of proper business for our department, which happened to be the first day we moved into the building and also the first day of a new academic year, we all started with brand new jobs, including me. So it has certainly been a learning process, and I am obliged to them all for bearing with me whilst I worked out what it was I supposed to do and how I was supposed to do it, and I hope I have helped them to understand what their jobs were in turn. The results, as ever in creative practice, ultimately, must speak for themselves: I will happily remind everyone that the CPDA end-of-year show is here in this building on Wednesday, June 14th, and that what we have seen over the past three years of occupation is a steady improvement in the standard and ambitions of our undergraduates across the disciplines in which we teach. It has always been our aim that our students should do more than simply pass through our hands into the world: they should emerge from our programmes as capable and creative professionals in an increasingly competitive environment. This requires more than a knowledge of photoshop, how to pull focus or understand narrative structure, important as those things are.

Tonight goes some special thanks to some of my colleagues for their contribution to this evening. In particular, Dr. Stephen Kennedy who has persistently harassed me to have this event for about three years now. Jan Tovey and Andrew Hill, who have collaborated on this and on the 360 degree film we finished shooting on Monday deserve plenty of praise for

saddling me with the obligation to go through with it. Thanks also to our tech team for finding all kinds of obscure kit we had somewhere or other and supporting this event and the tech requirements for the film, and the Masters students, Athip and Nop, for assisting tonight, but also on Monday where the main research work for this as a longer term project was done at the Culture Space in Canada Water. Ekaterina Sporton was both patient and skilled in designing and making the costumes, and many of my colleagues covered me during the rehearsal process. The greatest thanks of course must go to Sandra Norman, who has come more than 12,000 miles and across more than thirty years to volunteer for this unlikely project. More about her (and it) later on, but it is time to begin.

Dancers generally are puzzled (and marginalised) by one of the key cultural premises of Western civilisation. They struggle to conform to it in their everyday existence, but the persistence of this idea in culture generally makes them outsiders to that culture, and explains their appearance on the periphery of society. The insistence that the cultural assumptions applying to the body must apply to them is the theme of this lecture. Dancers are not alone in experiencing this bewilderment: they are merely the group I know best who suffer a fundamental misunderstanding of their experience and often have it played back to them in shapes and narratives that they do not recognise. They are more prone, vulnerable even, to having their experience explained, talked about in their own presence as if in the third person, than other groups experiencing something similar. It isn't that this phenomena has gone unnoticed: (I have used the word deliberately) it definitely hasn't as I will show presently: there have been an number of onlookers interested in identifying it, but the prism through which dance as a body practice is viewed refracts their reality into a spectrum limited by the culture of which they are meant to be a part. The very identification of a problem in this regard demands reconfiguration of phenomena into the comprehensible, and it is the habit of doing so against a particular intellectual tradition that I am seeking to challenge this evening.

It starts with Descartes. He was in pursuit of an explanation about existence, inspired by the mathematics at which he was so adept, and started off as a younger man with the challenging idea that our fate (our certain death) was determined by our imagination or lack thereof, that we died because we had an expectation of doing so. His early speculations on this matter are often dismissed, though to me it seems this particular idea led him to the one for which he is most famous: Cartesian dualism, or the mind-body problem. The Cogito, 'I think, therefore I am'. This aphorism has forever privileged the intellectual over the body, implied (though Descartes might be horrified at the uses of his work) that the formulation of existence and experience ought to be the preserve of the mind. Intellectual conception was the only guarantee of a truthful assertion, the very formation of the proposition is what makes the proposition true. In itself, it becomes an extension of much older ideas in intellectual culture about the unobserved life not worth living (attributed to Socrates and that comes to us via Plato), or the agonies of Augustine: 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.' In themselves they sum up the dilemma of the intellectual when faced with the realities of the body: in all cases, their solution has been to separate the physical from the rest of their existence, ordering matters as required by the intellect, assuming that the power to propose is equal to the power to exist. This is a very interesting thought, and one that inspires the noospherians, those who think our future will be in uploading ourselves into some kind of cosmic internet and relieving ourselves of the demands of the body in doing so. I suspect,

that were this even possible one day, the permanent deferral of death might result in some exceptional procrastination.

Vico, quite antithetical to this in his concept of knowing, founded his ideas on memory or imagination and locating such knowing in the realm of the mind, acknowledged the possibility that to get there might take participation in an activity that produces qualitative outcomes: this is the realm not of the creative but of the critical intellectual. This short allusion is not a justification of what comes next, merely a touchstone of a premise that needs fleshing out. I remain perfectly comfortable about how the history of ideas evolves in its own domain, and this is not so wide ranging a critique of this to make a more strident claim that such a history lacks the unity of the person. My concern is the point where such ideas spill out, uncontrolled and poorly understood, into the domain of the physical.

I might start at the obvious limitation of seeking understanding through a life already divided between the comforts of intellectuality and the realities of physicality as a contingent process. Quite simply, the mode in which the intellectual engages with the body requires more than the limited expressive power of thinking. Dance isn't intellectual process by other means, and intellectual inquiry in other art forms invariably acknowledges this truth: if it could be formulated in words, then it requires no art. However, in much of the rest of the arts the emphasis is on what is produced rather than how (I think especially of music and the complexities of the how, that often remain unremarked upon). Dance depends on a body to represent it, and the movement of synapses is an inadequate substitution. The hubris demanded for offering an account of the body by someone of such limited experience of it and whose method of development of the concept is desk-bound seems remarkable. A clear preference for the life of the mind cannot possibly be the basis of an authoritative account of the body even if, as intellectuals are want to do, you accept Cartesian dualism as the basis of existence and the only possible point of departure. I will return to this later, noting that some of those I am about to disparage have at least glimpsed the foothills of this problem, but they have dealt with it in an entirely intellectual way, whilst making claim to speak for the physical. This doesn't even make sense in Cartesian terms. It turns out that minds and ideas can evolve, but bodies often can't: the body referred to in the abstract is always the same body, and that body is only a concept. The ideas have a life of their own that is happily denied the very vessel of the existence they think they are experiencing or explaining.

I suspect this general privileging of the mind is why dancers see themselves outside of society and often have problems associating outside their own closed circles of social experience. Many years ago, when I was first looking at the literature around intellectual enquiry into dance, I repeatedly found the irreconcilable propositions of dance; as innate to human experience on the one hand and dance as a marginalised cultural practice on the other repeated in the impenetrable and serial bunglings of dance academics. They were seeking to express the difficulties of holding the two contradictory propositions simultaneously, without the insight or intellectual heft to make such propositions stick. This wasn't their only problem: dance was cited as both an expression of primitive urges and a construct of culture; dancers were both horribly brutalised *and* symbols of freedom, choreographers were the last word in authorship but dancers could not be distinguished, Yeats' style, from the substance of the dance. The examples are many, and the damning conclusion that one comes to is that, as yet, no seriously intelligent person has ever thought

deeply enough about dance to give it an intellectual framework that has stuck. I acknowledge the contributions of some tremendous reviewers like Arlene Croce or Edwin Denby, some cultural specialists like Kirstein or more latterly Mark Franko, historians like the ever meticulous Slonimsky, but dance still waits, will go on waiting for its Gombrich or Panofsky to give it its theoreticians, or for a Brecht, Stanislavsky or Augusto Boal as master maker/thinkers, or an Adorno who could make claim to complex understanding of culture as a whole through a mind beautifully trained in musical composition. Laura Mulvey is first and foremost a filmmaker. Even digital technology has Jaron Lanier. For dance, this will never happen, and the *why* requires an explanation.

In the absence of such groundwork, those who have thought about dance have resorted to the authority of those who have thought about the body. There have, indeed, been a plethora of them, especially in the 20th century, and the names of Foucault, Merleau-Ponty or Deleuze and Guattari feature heavily in intellectual accounts of the body as it engages with dance. The limitations of such thinkers on the body have been pointed out many times: their inability to escape the legacy of Cartesian dualism left them confecting ever more unlikely realities about the body. These, like the Social Constructivist thinking emerging from Foucault's work, for instance, discredit them as having little more than a passing interest in the body except as it could be proposed as an extension of social forces (thus managing, in a moment of supposed insight and reordering of priorities, to reduce the body to its previous invisibility). The alternative has been the psychological imperative. As Heidegger jibed about Sartre, Ricoeur and others, "The French psychologists also misinterpret everything as an expression of something interior instead of seeing the phenomenon of the body in the context by which men are in relationship to each other". We are, really in a dance with the rest of society, and we are not the choreographer. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenological restricts bodily experiences to that which can be described, turning his propositions into something akin to Schrodinger's cat. Should the knowledge of dance, in Vico's sense of something experienced, imagined and remembered be as impossible as all that?

Being beguiled by continental philosophy might not prove much of a starting point for an understanding of dance and its challenging manifestations. The extension of enquiry into spectatorship, using borrowed ideas from the cinema is equally problematic. *Mutatis mutandis*, the exercise only results in reinforcing some conventional identity politics: the male gaze apparently dominating an artform where not only are most of the performers female, but most of the audience are as well. Rather than dig out the complexities that might make it so, and make it so popular that academics may make a career from observing it, I am repeatedly shocked at the extent to which the gauze of a predetermined view is applied to the phenomenon in front of it, using the gaze as a pretext. This is rarely argued but often asserted: 'it isn't my body being represented' writes one, determined not to be seduced by the charms of the performance. Quite a lot of baggage being taken into the theatre there, I suspect. Projection onto the action of sexual preference is disguised by apparent enquiry into the ambiguous role of the male in dance, especially Western dance and especially ballet. Yet this seems to belong to a distant era of intolerance and prejudice, distracting from what other qualities might be available to an astute observer not expressly seeking a reinforcement of their personal convictions. Notwithstanding the poor quality of this activity as intellectual enquiry, it seems difficult to hope for much insight from such undercritical

approaches. What then is the responsibility of the intellectual in formulating a notion about the body?

In the first place, it might be useful to identify some of the prejudices being displayed. The first, and most important to acknowledge, is the profound and unshakeable belief that enquiry of this sort could leave us with a comprehensive understanding about the phenomena in the first place, noting its story would be, by virtue of Descartes, that of the body rather than of a holistic phenomenon. In other words, such enterprises are doomed from the start, given the unsuitability of the material to the method and the experience of the enquirer. It is time to humbly express the limitations of the intellectual when giving an account of experience that is fundamentally discordant with their world-view. At best, it is partial in both senses of the word. It has a home-team bias, and it can only deal with a fraction of the whole. This suggests I have an idea about recasting the role of the intellectual in this context, and I certainly do.

The real opportunity to understand the body looks more like Vico than Foucault. To quote Isaiah Berlin, 'Vico's central point is that poetic feeling which must 'plunge deep into particulars', cannot exist when people think in concepts.' For Vico, inspired singers (and to Vico, Homer's voice is the greatest example), cannot coexist with philosophers and do not need to. This does not preclude appreciation: it changes the context of it into one that seeks to understand the origins of its power, and to accept a context where the critical intellect is inevitably accompanied by the loss of imaginative force. Dance helps us because it sets us outside the intellectual in our response. Mallarmé, the symbolist poet, was wrong when saying of Loie Fuller that she was 'writing with her body'. She was doing nothing of the sort: she was dancing and he was writing about her. The symbiotic relationship between dancer and dance that Yeats spoke of was perhaps closest to an analysis of the problem that we have yet seen.

I want to speak briefly then about the process of dancing, something that I have done very little of for the past 15 years prior to this project. You deserve an explanation of why I have offered this as an inaugural event. You are about to see a dance from thirty years ago performed by the same people who did it then. Or not, as the case may be, as neither myself nor Sandra Norman, my partner in this evening's performance, could make much of a claim to being or doing what we were then. The idea was first raised when the small dance company we both worked for more than three decades ago was having its 30th anniversary, and Sandra was recruited to contact all the former dancers across the decades. When it came to me there must have been some bittersweet memories for both of us: we were never particularly close, and we were both very focussed, ambitious young dancers, but (essential to this project, actually), people change, our destinies as dancers and as people continued. Once contacted, I rifled through the few relics I have of my performing career. There isn't much, considering the international context of it, and the fact that dancers aren't paid enough to carry an archive around with them. Surprisingly, I was still in possession of some videotapes, and I had our tech team convert them.

What emerged was a highlight, for both Sandra and myself. A short, ten-minute duet of a fractious relationship set to sentimental music from long forgotten operettas. I sent the video back to New Zealand with the warning that it looked good enough to revisit, but I wasn't especially serious. It was only when, looking at the freshness of the choreography and the

weight of its themes, it occurred to both of us that whilst a reconstruction could (and should) be ruled out, there might still be another dance waiting for us inside this one.

I am grateful to Sandra for making the journey here and enduring three weeks of rehearsals, as we both nursed our long-standing wounds from performance careers whilst seeking something new from the dance. There are two main observations to be shared with you about this. For an artform that all too often appears to celebrate youth and vitality, it is worth understanding and observing the passage of the body through a succession of states. The dancing happens within a framework of circumstances, one of which is the unreliability of the body and our memory of it through time. As Foucault noted, it is important to be clear in the history of ideas about whom you are speaking. The big question he raises in discussions about Marxism is which Marx we might now be talking about. It matters. If this is true for the process of ideas, noting this is usually only linear in retrospect, it is an almost unavoidable truth for two dancers who last performed this work 31 years ago. The weight of time contrasts the challenges of today with the ease of the past. Our destinies are not simply physical ones, but are about how we have moved along with time in all the aspects of our human experience. This is expressly a theme of this performance: this isn't about trying to relive the past or an inability to put that past behind us. Rather, it has been an opportunity to revisit the theme of the earlier dance and ask how the passage of ourselves through time might enrich a precocious work performed by people with, at that stage, their lives ahead of them.

I have argued earlier that intellectuals sometimes think they are the only ones with a franchise on the validity of ideas because the manifestations of dance sometimes seem to look just the way they always did. That indicates how little attention they are paying to the phenomenon in front of them. Most choreographers, and all dancers, understand how fragile those manifestations are. They are fundamentally contingent. Without wishing to be drawn further into the failings of the history of intellectual enquiry into dance, one of the others is the preoccupation with positing dances as text (hence my reference to Mallarmé earlier). Most published, written texts demonstrate some sort of stability, and writers and editors worry over them given the permanence and authority of the printed word. A new edition or translation can't alter the substance of a work and still be thought of as the same. In dance performance, this isn't true. What is true is that rehearsal will build up particular habits of going about producing a performance, but as the proverb says, you never step into the same river twice, and that is the reality of performing a dance.

The rehearsal process has been full of surprises for us. After all, we hadn't met for thirty years in the first place. But it was remarkable how quickly we resumed. Some parts of the dance were easy enough to learn again, indeed where we got some sections wrong our own bodies were reliable guides to setting ourselves straight or demanding an adaptation. We both recall the performances where the videos we worked from were made: we had a fight before one of them, and before another we were so cool about performing this within a very long programme we thought of it as a rest along the way. By that stage we were engaged in the best mode of performing any dance, the one where the dance does itself through you. This takes tremendous focus, and I suspect is no different to professional athletes or musicians. You work towards a point where you are able to find a place where thinking is unnecessary and even distracting, that, no matter what exertions are demanded, you perform through the dance, you become it and that defies intellectual process.

I am reminded by the way one dance academic dismisses this idea. 'Dancers', she says, 'describe this as the body knowing, but this doesn't help us at all'. She is obliquely suggesting the intellectual limitations of dancers, who seem to her too inarticulate to give her the answer that she wants: an explanation that fits her world view of dancers, especially ballet dancers, as manipulated yet powerful, a typical paradox of the dance academic who sees Foucaultian power structures everywhere but cannot help acknowledging their transcendence by the actions of a well trained dancer just doing their job on stage. Being so distracted she has missed a quintessential reality of the dancer's experience. This is entirely the reverse of being inarticulate, if I may play a little game with words, as the joints and sinews create through action something defying conversion into text. These are the conditions where the dancer does their best work. It is not an act of stupidity, but of balance: ignoring the focus on the head into the whole corporeal experience and allowing the performance to happen. When Sandra Norman says to me in rehearsals that you can't think and breathe at the same time, I understand exactly what she is saying: there is a performance state that requires proper focus on how the whole of the dance manifests, and interrupting this with commentary distorts and disfigures the intent. In this process I have found myself wanting in this regard. All too often my long-standing retirement from the stage does not reveal itself in rehearsal as rusty virtuosity, rather it has shown me an inability to connect my physicality to the doing of a dance. This is not a function of age, but of a kind of focus. I simply no longer have the intensity and single-purposedness required to give justice to the full demands made by the dancing. I sense my disconnection from that state of grace that dancers seek, of allowing the dance to unfold itself. My technical shortcomings that translate into incompetence are the result of a long period lived in the pursuit of goals beyond a great performance. You cannot just step back into the river.

This sobering thought brings me back to my earlier promise to explain why dance and its intellectuals can never be reconciled. There is a gulf of mutual incomprehensibility that goes beyond Cartesian dualism: after all, only one side is affected by it. For the other, it is the integration of the whole that is the starting point of the enterprise. The challenge of explaining it faces both the inadequacy of words and their pointlessness.

If I am right then philosophy-based enquiry into dance is the wrong place to start. This has distracted and detracted from improving our appreciation of how the body is integrated into the mechanism: as someone might have reminded Descartes about the body, he should try formulating a concept without one. Dance, because it attracts so much attention can tell us much more about ourselves if we avoid resorting to the use of such unsuitable tools. The locus of knowledge of dance is found in the doing of it, and that is exactly what we are about to do.